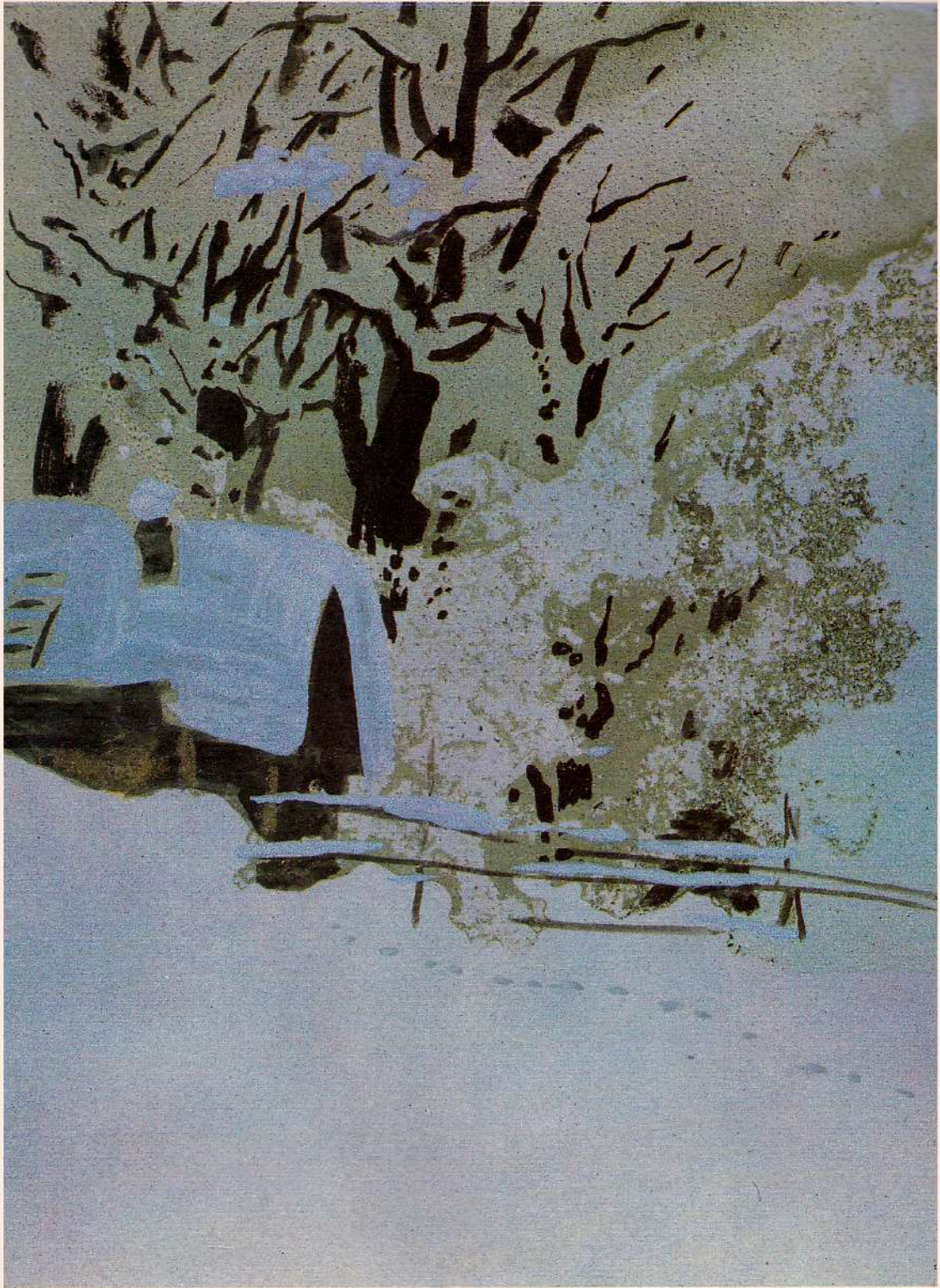


Anton Chekhov

PATCH



RADUGA PUBLISHERS . MOSCOW



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PATCH

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Translated from the Russian by JAMES RIORDAN



**RADUGA PUBLISHERS
MOSCOW**

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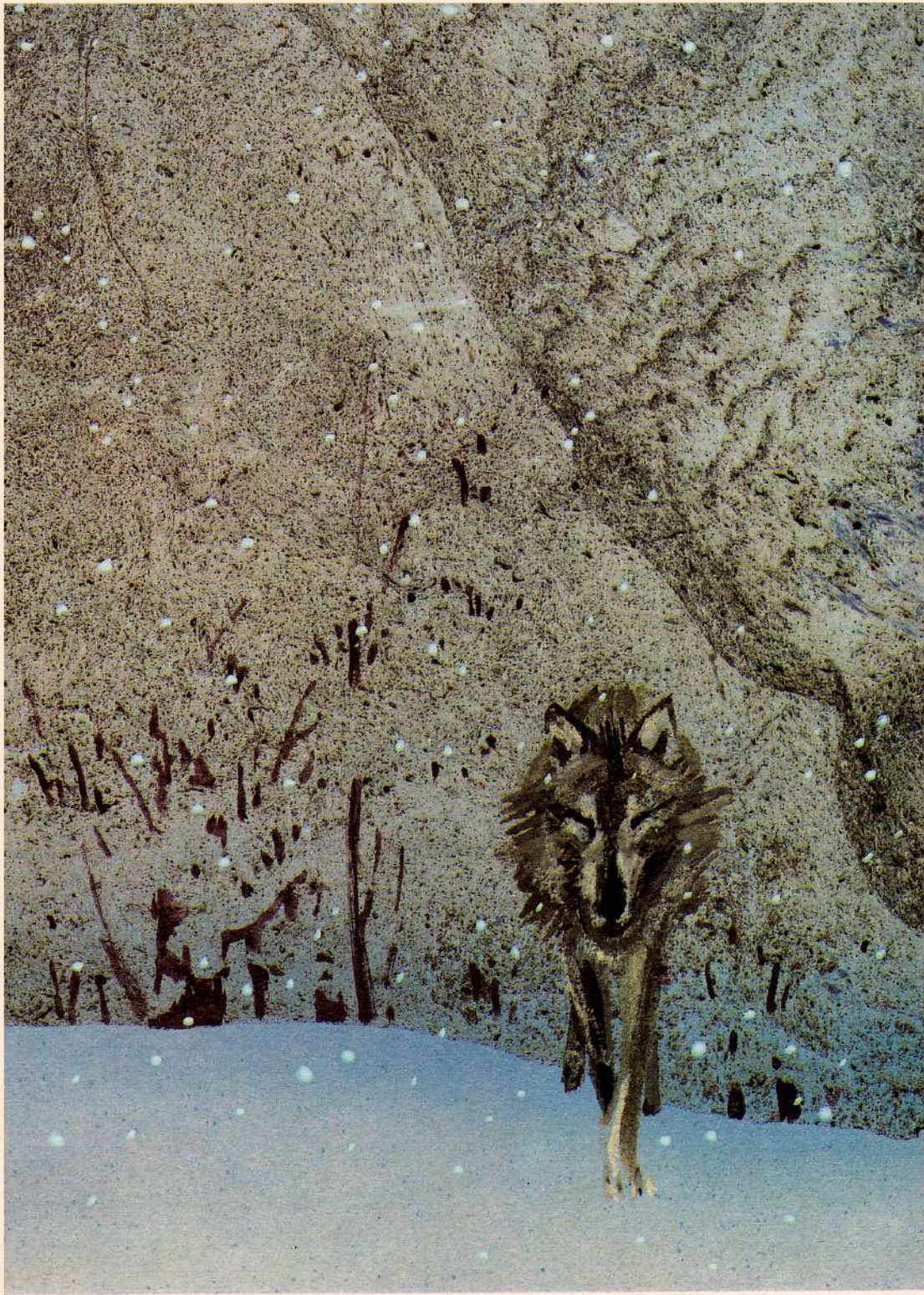
A hungry she-wolf got up to go hunting. Her three cubs were all fast asleep, huddled together in each other's warmth. Before setting off, she gave each of them a lick to say she would not be long.

It was already March — spring in fact — yet at night the trees crackled in the cold frost as though it was still December. Stick your tongue out and it got nipped good and hard.

The she-wolf was in poor fettle and she was very wary: the least sound made her jump. She feared lest someone should harm her cubs while she was away. The scent of men and horses made her nervous; so did tree stumps, wood piles and the dark post-road with horse dung on it. She sensed men lurking in the gloom behind each tree and dogs howling somewhere beyond the forest.

She was getting old and losing her sense of smell. So she occasionally mistook a fox's track for a dog's and lost her way — that had never happened when she was young. Being weak, she no longer hunted calves and rams, and she kept well clear of mares with foals, and fed only on carrion. Very seldom did she have fresh meat — in spring when she met a rabbit and made off with the babies or when she stole into a sheep pen and snatched a lamb.

A forest lodge stood by the post-road, about three miles from her lair. It was home to a watchman Ignat, an old-timer of some seventy years; he was forever coughing and talking to himself. He usually slept at night and wandered by day about the forest with his shotgun, whistling at the hares. At some time or other he must have worked as a mechanic on the railways, for he never came to a halt without shouting 'Hard on the brakes!' and he would not move off without a 'Full steam ahead!' He had a big black mongrel bitch called Blackie,



and when she ran too far ahead he would yell 'Back up there!' Sometimes he sang, staggering tipsily, and he would topple over — blown down by the wind, thought the wolf — and shout 'Off the rails!'

The wolf dimly remembered a ram and two ewes grazing near the lodge in summer and fancied she had heard bleating in the barn not so long ago. As she approached the hut, she thought to herself that it must now be March—the season for new-born lambs to be in the barn. Tortured by hunger, she thought how greedily she would devour a lamb, and such thoughts made her grind her teeth and her eyes glint in the dark like two yellow lamps.

Old Ignat's hut, his shed, barn and water-well all had deep snow piled up around them. All was still. Blackie was asleep under the barn.

The wolf climbed over a snowdrift onto the barn roof and began scratching the thatch away with her paws and muzzle. The straw was rotten and crumbling, and she nearly tumbled through. Suddenly, the smell of warm steam, dung and ewe's milk hit her; down below a lamb gently bleated from the cold draught. The wolf sprang through the hole and her four paws and chest hit something soft and warm. That must be the ram. Just then something in the barn suddenly let out a whimper, began to howl and cry in a shrill, nagging sort of voice. The sheep all cowered against the wall and the nervous wolf quickly seized something in her teeth and dashed off.

She ran as fast as she could. Scenting wolf, the old watchdog howled furiously, frightened hens clucked inside the lodge and the master came out onto the porch.

'Full steam ahead!' he shouted. 'Sound the whistle!'

And he whistled like an old steam engine and gave several shouts which echoed back at him from the forest.

When she was some way from the lodge the wolf slowed down. Holding her prey between her teeth and dragging it along in the snow, she suddenly realised that it was heavier than lambs normally were at that time of year. It seemed, too, to have an odd smell and was making peculiar squealing noises.

The she-wolf stopped and laid her burden on the snow, so that she could rest and start her meal—then all of a sudden she leapt back







in disgust. This was no lamb. It was a puppy: black, with a big head and spindly legs, and with a white patch on his forehead. Judging by his antics it was an ordinary farm dog, one of Blackie's offspring. The puppy was licking his injured back, wagging his tail and quite unafraid, began to bark at the wolf. She growled in irritation and started to lope away.

The puppy ran after her. She looked back and bared her teeth. He stopped, puzzled, and must have thought she wished to play with him, because he glanced back towards the lodge and gave a happy bark as if inviting his mother to come and play too.

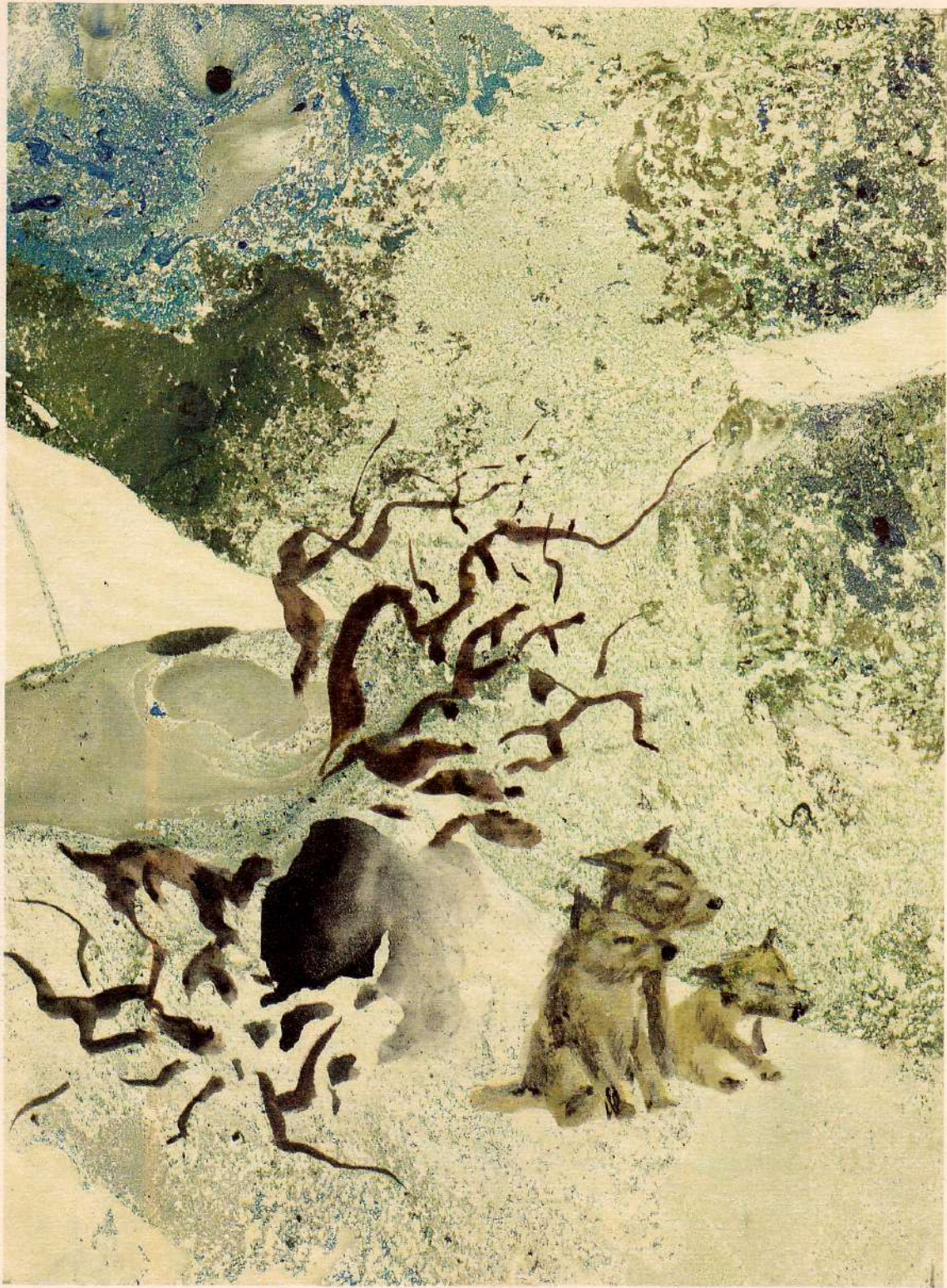
It was already getting light, and as the wolf made her way home through a thick aspen grove, she clearly made out each line of the trees; the heath grouse were already waking up and beautiful cocks often fluttered up, disturbed by the reckless prancing and barking of the puppy.

'Why does he run after me?' wondered the she-wolf, annoyed. 'He must want me to eat him.'

She and her cubs lived in a shallow hole. Three years before, a tall old pine had been torn up by the roots in a storm, and that was how the hole had formed. Now there were dead leaves and moss at the bottom and it was strewn with bones and horns, the cubs' playthings. The cubs were awake and all three very much alike, stood on the edge of the hole, wagging their tails and watching for their mother's return. Seeing them, the puppy stopped some way off and stared at them in curiosity. Then, seeing them staring raptly at him, he barked crossly as he would at strangers.

It was light now and the sun was up, snow sparkled all around, and still Patch stood apart, yapping. The mother was suckling her cubs, who prodded her scrawny belly with their paws while she gnawed a dry white horse bone. She was famished, the puppy had given her a headache with his barking; she felt like pouncing on the intruder and tearing him to pieces.

Finally the puppy grew tired. Seeing no one was afraid or even taking any notice of him, he approached the cubs timidly, squatting down, then bounding forward. Now, in the daylight, it was easy to get a good look at him: he had a large white forehead with a sort of bump on it, just like stupid dogs have; his eyes were small, blue and dull,



while the expression of his entire face was incredibly silly. Coming up to the cubs, he pushed his big paws forward, placed his nose on them and began to whine:

'Mee-mee-mee ... eha-eha-eha.'

This made no sense to the cubs, yet they began to wag their tails. Then Patch cuffed a cub with his paw upon the cub's broad head and was cuffed hard in return. Patch stood sideways on, looking at the cub out of the corner of his eye and wagging his tail; then he abruptly started up and made several circles on the hard snow. The cubs chased after him. He rolled over on his back, kicking his paws in the air, and all three cubs pounced, squealing with joy, and began nipping him playfully, not meaning to hurt. Crows perching on a tall pine tree peered down on this scuffle and grew most excited. It was all very noisy and playful.

The sun shone down with spring-like warmth and the wood grouse flying over the storm-felled pine seemed to glitter like emeralds in the sunshine.

Wolves usually teach their cubs to hunt by giving them some prey to play with, so the she-wolf was content to let her cubs chase and wrestle with Patch in the snow. When they had played long enough, the cubs went back to their lair and lay down to sleep. The puppy whined a little because he was hungry, then he too stretched out in the sunshine and went to sleep. As soon as they woke up they started playing all over again.

Meanwhile, the she-wolf kept thinking of the night before—the lambs bleating in the barn and the smell of ewe's milk. She ground her teeth in hunger and went on gnawing greedily at the old bone, pretending it was a tender lamb. The cubs sucked and the puppy, hungry, ran round sniffing the snow.

'I think I'll eat him,' decided the she-wolf at last.

As she approached, Patch gave her nose a lick and yapped, thinking she wanted him to play. She had eaten dog in the old days, but this pup had a strong doggy smell, and since she was feeling poorly she could not stand that smell any more. It made her feel sick, so she let him be...

Towards nightfall it turned colder. Patch got bored and set off for home.



Soon after, when the cubs were fast asleep, the she-wolf went hunting once again. As with the night before, she jumped at the slightest sound, taking fright at tree stumps, brushwood and the dark lone clumps of juniper that looked like humans from far off. She ran over the frozen snow, keeping clear of the beaten track; yet suddenly, on the road far ahead, she saw a dark shadow moving slowly along.

She stared hard and pricked up her ears: yes, there was definitely something moving up ahead, she could hear the measured tread. Was it a badger? Cautiously, scarcely breathing, keeping well to one side, she overtook the dark shadow, glanced back and saw what it was.

It was Patch, making his way home leisurely to the lodge.

'He'd better not get in my way again,' thought the she-wolf, running swiftly ahead.

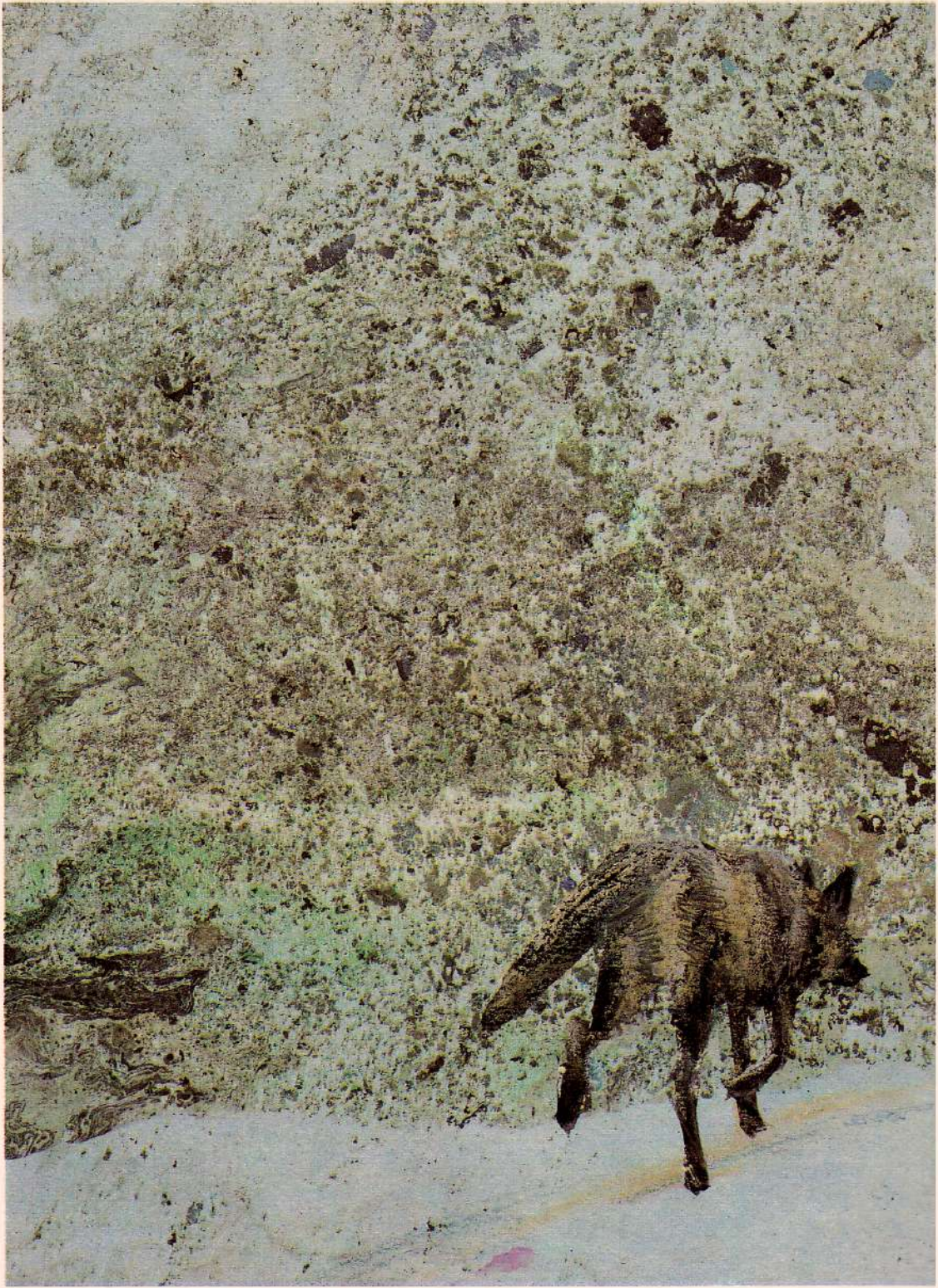
The lodge was not far off now. When she reached it, she climbed once more over the snowdrift onto the barn roof. Yesterday's gap had been mended with straw and there were two new beams across the roof. The wolf began working rapidly with paws and nose, yet hardly had she scented the warm steam and reek of dung than a happy barking rang out behind her. Patch was back. He jumped up to the she-wolf on the roof, then tumbled through the hole. Feeling at home in the warmth and recognising his own sheep, he barked even louder than ever.

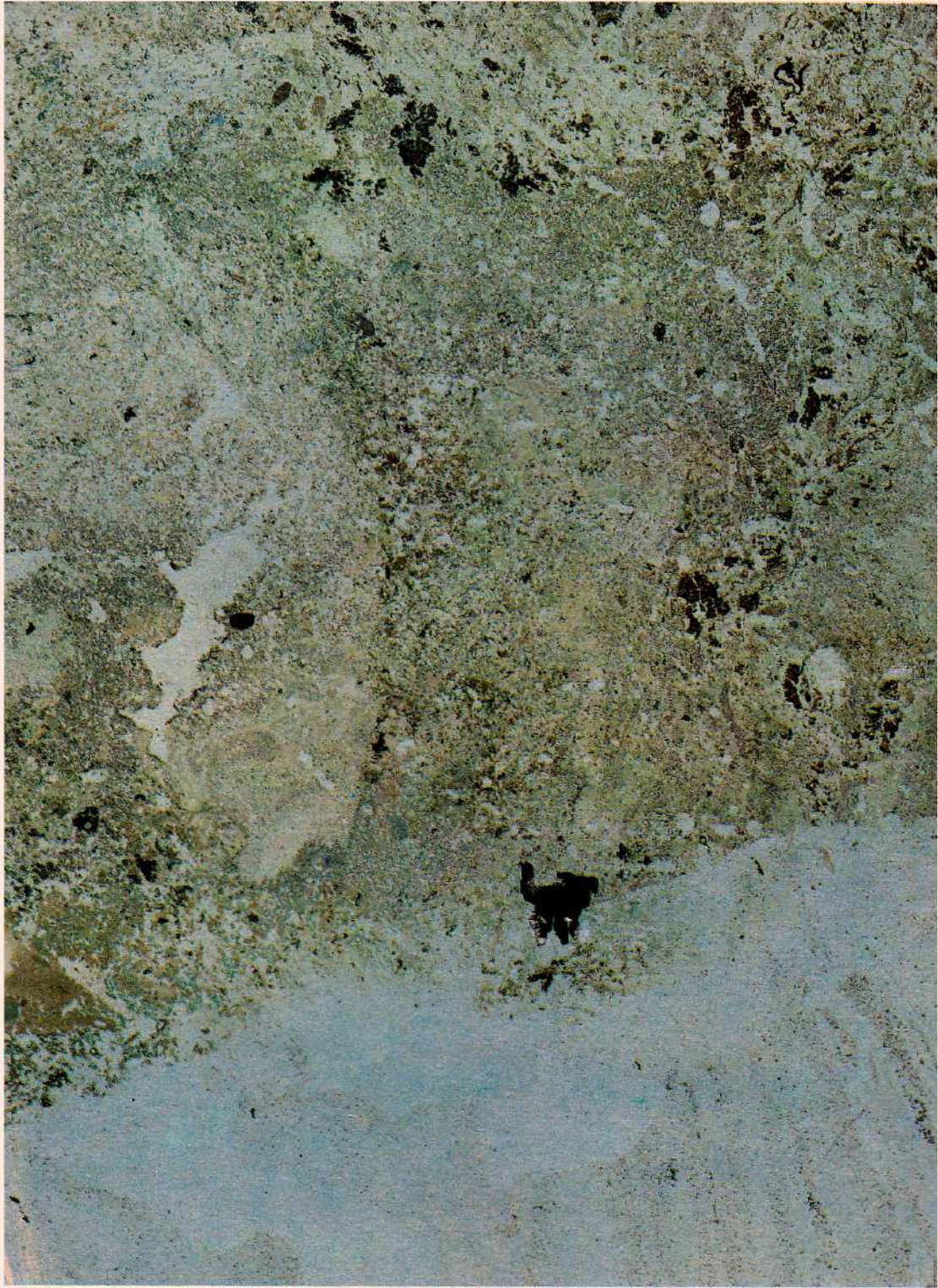
Underneath the barn, his mother Blackie awoke and set up a howl as she scented wolf. There was a panicky clucking of hens, but by the time old Ignat appeared on the porch with his shotgun the scared she-wolf was already far from the lodge.

'Darn and blast!' shouted the old watchman, whistling through his teeth. 'Full steam ahead!'

He pulled the trigger of his gun; it misfired; he had another go, but it misfired again. He tried for a third shot and this time a huge fiery shower of buckshot flew out of the barrel and let off a deafening retort—'Bang! Bang!' It kicked back hard into his shoulder; and then, taking the shotgun in one hand and a chopper in the other, he set off to see what all the fuss was about...

Shortly after he was on his way back to the lodge.





'What was it?' came the hoarse voice of a traveller spending the night with him; he had been woken up by the clamour.

'Nothing,' Ignat replied. 'Bit of nonsense. Our Patch tumbled down to sleep with the sheep in the warm. He hasn't got the sense to get in the door, he has to go poking around on the roof. Last night he messed up the roof and toddled off, the scalawag, now he's back playing tricks on that roof again.'


'Daft dog.'

'Yep, got a screw loose in the head,' sighed Ignat, pulling himself on top of the stove to sleep. 'I can't stand nitwits like that. Well, feller, let's hit the hay; we've got to be up early.'

Next morning he called Patch to him, gave his ears a hard tweak and gave him a sound thrashing with a switch, shouting all the while,

'Use the door in future, d'ye hear me? Use the door!'



The background of the entire page is a painting. It depicts a turbulent sea under a dark, stormy sky. In the center, a dark, jagged shape, possibly a ship's mast or a large wave, rises from the water. To the right, a ship's mast and rigging are visible, partially obscured by the dark shape. The water is a mix of dark blue and black, with white foam and spray. The sky is a mottled brown and grey. The overall mood is dramatic and somber.

А. Чехов
БЕЛОЛОБЫЙ

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